Book Review


As I respond to the insightful and informative book by Dr. Karen Seeley, I find it appropriate to situate myself within the context of this reflection. I approach this text as an Indian Christian Woman: each term is significant in defining and describing some aspect of my person, albeit briefly. In situating myself, I am conscious of the many layers of my being which have cultural, religious, social, political and gender dimensions to it. Situating myself also encourages me to highlight Dr. Seeley’s attention to “cultural selves,” since it determines the content and direction of a discussion, be it a clinical encounter or an academic discussion in this context about the text at hand.

I believe that for this discussion it becomes important to situate the author and to identify her audience in order for the text to be meaningful. Dr. Seeley is a Caucasian Woman and a practicing psychotherapist; her audience is psychotherapists who treat an increasingly diverse ethnic clientele. Having identified her audience and the context for her ensuing discussion, Dr. Seeley proceeds to make her case for a cultural psychotherapy. A cultural psychotherapy according to Dr. Seeley would recognize the client as a cultural being who has culturally conditioned reactions and responses to the therapeutic encounter and explore the cultural worlds of the client through tools such as ethnography. While the need for culturally informed psychotherapists has previously been identified, it has yet to be addressed in an effective manner, and Seeley attempts to bridge this gap.

I begin the review with a brief overview of the book and highlight some of Seeley’s main points that I believe are significant. The overview is followed by my personal reflections with particular attention to the strengths and weaknesses of Seeley’s arguments. By drawing on the examples of the two Indian clients Prakesh and Meena, I suggest that a cultural anthropology would not be as effective if the religious selves of the non-Western clients are not explored.

Dr. Seeley’s task in this book is threefold. First, she makes her case for a cultural psychotherapy by giving an overview of psychotherapy as it is currently practiced, with particular attention given to the continued influence of Freud on psychoanalytic thought and practice, and its limitations. Second, by presenting the patient’s perspective of the therapeutic encounter between White therapists and their clients, she illustrates the need for cultural psychotherapy. Third, by exploring the cultural worlds of the clients, she provides a model for how psychotherapy can be adapted to the cultural contexts of the clients.

I find Dr. Seeley’s arguments to be well-supported and her examples to be compelling. Her attention to the cultural dimensions of the therapeutic encounter is refreshing and much needed. However, I do have some reservations about her approach. For example, her emphasis on ethnography as a tool for understanding cultural worlds may not be sufficient for clients whose religious beliefs are an integral part of their cultural identity. I believe that a more comprehensive approach that integrates both cultural and religious dimensions would be more effective.

In conclusion, Dr. Seeley’s book is a valuable contribution to the field of cultural psychotherapy. It provides a clear and cogent argument for the need for culturally informed psychotherapists and presents a practical model for how this can be achieved. I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in the field of psychotherapy, particularly those working with diverse ethnic clienteles.
and non-White patients, Dr. Seeley proves the lack of fit between the patient and therapist. The interviews provide an important glimpse into the experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of the therapeutic encounter as experienced by non-white clients. Third, Dr. Seeley offers suggestions for a cultural psychotherapy through an interdisciplinary approach that would include anthropology and its subfields, allowing for a more informed therapist and a meaningful therapeutic encounter for the client. It is important to note that Seeley uses the term global clinic in this discussion thus recognizing the diversity of cultures, ethnicities, faiths, and traditions within society, and in particular the clinic. As the clientele becomes culturally diverse, we become aware of the limitations of current theories and methods. It is this lack of fit between the needs of the clients and the expertise of the therapists that Dr. Seeley proceeds to discuss.

Dr. Seeley begins her discussion by identifying the continued influence of Freudian theory on current psychotherapy and its limitations for one to become a more culturally informed therapist. Freudian theory and subsequent models of psychoanalysis like Ego Psychology, Object Relations Theory, and Self-Psychology function on the premise that the underlying causes of psychological disturbances and their treatments are invariant across cultures. Current psychotherapy thus focuses on the socially decontextualized individual as the object of their diagnosis and treatment. Theories of psychoanalysis, however, were products of the cultural and historical contexts in which they evolved, and the theories developed during this period considered the individual divorced from social obligations as the ideal person. Current psychotherapeutic practice is founded on Western ideals of selfhood, which emphasize individuation, separation, independence and particular understandings of health, illness and treatment. In a global clinic where the clientele is increasingly diverse, such universal concepts fail to cultivate receptivity to alternative and especially non-Western contexts, according to Seeley.

Having identified the assumptions and limitations of current psychotherapeutic thought and practice, Seeley offers anthropology as a means to becoming a culturally informed therapist. Anthropology and its related sub-fields like psychological anthropology, ethnopsychology, comparative human development and linguistics provide the necessary insights into culturally shaped beliefs, symbols, meanings, concepts of self, emotion, developmental stages and so on. An important step in an interdisciplinary approach, Seeley rightly states, is to challenge the existing resistances to incorporating cultural insights into therapy, including Freudian theory. Anthropologists themselves cannot come to a consensus about the role of culture, and theories range from Geertz who states that thoughts, emotions and beliefs are culturally determined, public and shared to post-Geertzian theories that they are located within the individual with varying motivations. Seeley suggests that Bakhtin’s theory that cultures are in a process of constant evolution through dialogue among its members is useful within a therapeutic setting. It allows the psychotherapist to view the treatment sessions as cultural events mutually